The Whittier Drum Project has brought the community together through the talents of youth and their dedication to drumming and has used drumming to link professionals to their own communities.

Hand-drumming to build community: The story of the Whittier Drum Project

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The Whittier Drum Project had its beginning while I was working as a therapist in a residential adolescent treatment facility. I kept hand drums in my office where my young clients used them during therapy sessions. Another therapist, John Brewer, and I were inspired to form a hand-drumming group, using African and Latin rhythms, with interested residents for about an hour a week. We did not consider this process to be an official therapy modality; we would get together purely for the joy of playing drums. These young people were already involved in individual, group, and family sessions each week. We wanted to provide an experience for them that was purely about connecting with others and themselves through drumming.

Over the years, I had been a participant in drum circles and classes in Denver, Fort Collins, and Boulder, Colorado, and I had noticed how I felt grounded and more at peace with myself when I drummed. Also, when I drummed with others, rhythm seemed to
move through me, then into the drum, and then out of the drum to connect me to the rest of the group. I witnessed how being joined by rhythm transcended and often erased barriers between us. Drumming made me feel good about myself and others. Drumming is also very accessible, not like playing the piano or violin. Simple rhythms can be taught to people with no drumming experience very quickly and an ensemble rhythm created with a group in one sitting. From my years of studying with a handful of drum teachers, most notably Gregory Long, who has done much work in connecting drumming to spirituality, I had a number of multiple-part African and Latin rhythms to share. As I was considering these things, drumming seemed like a great way to engage with the young people in treatment.

Initially we contracted with the youth to do eight weekly sessions with the option to extend the group if that was what the members wanted. As the sessions progressed, other staff members began dropping in. It was exciting to see the traditional hierarchical roles and boundaries between staff and residents dissipate during the drumming. Everyone seemed to be genuinely enjoying each other and the group rhythm that we were generating.

After the initial eight weeks, the youth in the group wanted to continue. The group met for about another three months. Toward the end, it seemed that interest was waning. The youth were more fidgety and had more difficulty staying on task, and so my colleague and I decided to end the group. We anticipated that the participants would be relieved and maybe would even feel a bit liberated from having to come to the group. To our surprise, the participants were outraged that we had ended the group without talking to them. They did not want to stop and said this was sometimes the only thing they looked forward to each week. We all agreed to meet for three more weeks. John and I were totally taken aback by the intensity of their response and how these young people had become attached to the group. We did not fully comprehend the meaning the group had to them. Youth wanting to attend, let along prolong groups in a residential treatment center, was exceedingly uncommon.
Birth of the Whittier Drum Project

Soon after the drumming group ended, I left the treatment center and went into full-time private practice in a storefront in the Whittier neighborhood in Denver. I wanted to explore working in a space where there could be art, play, and music materials (especially my hand drums), all in the same room. I also wanted to find a way to get involved with the community, and it occurred to me that hand-drumming might offer a way to make these connections. I began to attend Whittier’s Neighborhood Association meetings to meet people and get a sense of how things worked in the neighborhood.

Over eight months, I attended meetings of the Whittier Neighborhood Association monthly and repeatedly presented the concept of using hand-drumming with youth and families in the community, but did not receive any attention until the association president backed my idea. Several weeks later, multiple community leaders were meeting at my storefront office. They expressed their concerns with the classes, and they were similar to my own doubts: How would we motivate the youth to attend and keep attending? How would participants feel as if they were getting the most from these interactions? How would they practice their rhythms and explore their own creativity without having drums at home? What would this class mean to them if the only time they could drum was during the class?

In 1953, D. W. Winnicott, a pediatrician and psychiatrist in England, had published “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena.” In this article, he examined how infants and toddlers begin to soothe themselves and individuate from their caregivers. His observations led him to believe that caregivers and infants together create transitional objects that facilitate this process. The special blanky, the worn and smelly teddy bear, the shared game of peekaboo, and other things become transitional objects that have special significance and stand out from other toys, activities, or bedding. The objects facilitate attachment and connection by becoming something shared while also serving self-soothing functions when the caregiver is not immediately available. Think of the
Peanuts comic strip character Linus, standing with his blanket and thumb in his mouth. Transitional objects also help the child learn to modulate and regulate levels of excitement that occur through relational interactions, such as in a game of peekaboo. These objects, Winnicott posited, become special because both caregiver and child mutually make them so. They co-create the specialness of these particular things.

Winnicott saw transitional objects and phenomena as stepping-stones in the developmental work around recognition of self and other that occurs in the child-caregiver relationship. He believed that the child discards old and picks up new transitional objects along the way as needed, and that the adult does much the same through life. Ultimately Winnicott viewed culture as transitional phenomena, or space. Culture thus becomes the connective tissue between us all. Taking Winnicott’s view of culture as transitional phenomena and drumming as cultural expression, we had a way to understand our hand-drumming program.

The Winnicottian developmental answer to the question of giving enough in the after-school drumming program was to give the youth participants drums to provide transitional objects for connection and, in terms of being able to play when away from the group, for individuation. Each participant would be given an African-style hand drum at the beginning of the classes. In order to keep the drum after the eight-week program ended, the youth would have to attend a majority of the classes. We hoped that this would help with motivation. We now had enough to create a program. Our mission became to build leadership and community through drumming. The Whittier Drum Project was born.

Implementation of the First Whittier Drum Project

From previous experiences, I had learned to keep the classes small. Seven participants per group was a very manageable number (with more students, I would spend the entire class dealing with unwieldy
behavior). I also felt that with such a class size, each student would get the attention he or she needed.

At the time, I was teaching a for-pay adult drum class in the evenings. Three members of the group volunteered to assist me in teaching the Whittier Drum Project classes as they learned about the project. Their help was critical to the success of the classes. Having someone else there who knew the rhythms made it easier to teach counter-rhythms. They led half the class with one piece of rhythm, while I led the other half of the class with a counter-rhythm. As students organized around teachers keeping the beats, they gained a sense of mastery as the different rhythms came together. We sounded good; more important, the youth experienced themselves as sounding good. Soon we were playing three- and four-part rhythms.

One exercise focused on building leadership skills. This involved doing a solo with the drum. The group would play one rhythm, and each participant would take a turn and play a solo over the beat. In this way, each person was able to experience supporting others and being supported. This exercise also helped break down inhibitions, as the young people could play whatever they wanted for their solos. Our rule was that there were no mistakes in soloing. The group, however, had to continue to support the soloist by not being pulled off the beat, by being a steady, dependable support. To our delight, as the weeks progressed, the participants kept coming back to the after-school program.

Several rules were created during the first group, and these were respected and referred to by both facilitators and participants as needed:

- Be respectful of each other and each other’s differing abilities to learn the rhythms.
- Be respectful to the drums.
- No cursing.
- No talking when drumming and no drumming when talking.
- No hitting.
As people began to know each other better, they joked and teased each other about their drumming, but in a respectful way. We noticed a sense of community growing in the groups. One student took on the task of laying out the snacks for her group each week. Others set up chairs or helped carry the drums. As the students drummed together, they had to listen to the others to figure out how their rhythm fit in with the whole. At a nonverbal level, students were sharpening their abilities to tune into others and match the group volume, intensity, and frequency. Also, each student had the experience of being listened to by others, of having their drumming, their voice, count.

As in any other group process, there were times when the participants tested limits and exhibited behaviors and frustrations that got in the way. Our students would occasionally argue about which rhythm the group should play and who got to use certain drums. Sometimes the drumming itself seemed to soften conflict. Other times, we needed dialogue to address difference. However, once we made it through the conflict and the drumming continued, the group mood would lighten, and students were once again able to experience the joy and pride of mastering the beats and the sound of their ensemble. Although talking about obstacles was certainly necessary at times, the act of drumming often provided a way for repairing differences and, especially, building a sense of community within the group.

The eight weeks culminated in two performances. People at both events loved us and would join us in the drumming. We were very welcoming, and continue to be, and we encourage audience participation. Twenty-nine of the thirty-one students who enrolled (we took on three extra students) completed the program.

Tweaking the model

We viewed the program as a huge success. Many of the youth wanted to continue with the program, and parents wanted to get involved. The community members who saw us perform expressed
joy at seeing the local young people playing the African and Latin rhythms that for many were connected to their culture. When we played, it really seemed that the village was encircling and supporting its youth. The appreciation, which often took the form of foot tapping and dancing, was genuine. The adults were not feigning enjoyment for the benefit of the young people, and the youth could perceive that.

We wound up on occasion having participants in our groups who were three years of age and younger. They added a different kind of energy, and with them the groups took on much more of a “village” feel. Because of this, we decided that we would not have a minimum age. We also noticed that when parents participated, the groups had a much different quality to them. The youth were more settled, and the groups were strengthening family ties as well as building community bonds. Older siblings helped younger siblings with the rhythms and handling the drums; babies slept in their mothers’ laps, soothed by the rhythm while their moms drummed; and parents held their younger children’s hands and drummed together.

Other things emerged. Parents traded recipes, talked about their children with each other, and in general added an expanded sense of community to the groups. With every program since that first one, we have encouraged parents and caregivers to attend and participate in the classes. We can now say that the Whittier Drum Project serves youth and families rather than just youth. During some classes, we have had three generations from one family drumming together.

The Whittier Drum Project today (two years later)
We have now run the program seven times. The majority of the young people who participate have returned to the program several times, and four students have been with us from the beginning. Each time a student returns for another round of classes, he or she receives a different percussive instrument such as a set of claves, a
shaker, or a bell. As these instruments accrue in the different households and as many of the families have multiple youth in the program, we are building musical families. Folks have told us that they play the rhythms and jam together outside the classes. Some of our young drummers have played for other community groups such as a “step” performance group (this is a form a dance that youth are developing to hip-hop music), a summer camp, and their classes at school. One of the parents said that her three young drummers have a sense of pride at being able to show other children the rhythms that they can play. A mother reported that as she started to attend the classes with her son, the drumming became her therapy.

About ten families now comprise the core of the Whittier Drum Project. They have taken on organizing and governance roles for the program and have launched a broader organization. As one parent exclaimed while she was helping to write a grant proposal for our program, “I’ve become a community leader.” She had not imagined that she could write a grant or put together a community organization. Such capacity building has been one of the critical by-products of the drumming. Our oldest student, a sixteen year old, became an assistant drum instructor. She said that what most affected her about the experience of teaching drumming was being able to see what it is like on the other side of the student-teacher relationship. One of the parents has now become a drum instructor, as have two of our volunteers. We have all grown as our program has grown. Recently, we successfully mounted a special fundraising/graduation/gala event at a local community center. Over one hundred people attended, and the money raised helped us to continue our program. Our leadership team planned every aspect of the event and worked hard to implement their plan. We can now add event planning and fundraising to our collective résumé. All of these newly found talents, skills, and successes came about because of the community that was developed through our hand-drumming class.

We started out being, and continue to be, a culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse bunch. Although we have not formally collected demographic data, we estimate that our participants are
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65 percent African American, 25 percent Latino, and 10 percent Caucasian. We have also started a class for adults in the neighborhood. Besides being a lot of fun and broadening our community, the adult class brings in new people, with their special talents, to help with our organization. All of our classes remain free of charge for community residents.

The Whittier Drum Project has now performed at many community and special events, including preinaugural celebrations for Denver’s mayor, John Hickenlooper; a good-bye celebration for Denver’s district attorney, Bill Ritter; and the dedication of Fuller Park in the Whittier neighborhood. We have been featured on DCTV and on a local network news broadcast. We have brought our community together around our youth, and our youth, through their talent and dedication to drumming, have linked us to other communities. In addition to the Denver Foundation, we have received support from the City of Denver Focus Neighborhoods Small Grants Program, the Neighborhood Resource Center, and the Denver Kiwanis Foundation.

Transformation: Offspring of the Whittier Drum Project

After seeing how successful the community drum program was, I wanted to adapt the model to meet the therapeutic needs of troubled teens, taking it a step further by adding a clinical component. In collaboration with the community court of Denver, which takes a restorative justice model approach to youth offenders in our neighborhood, and the Bread for the Journey Foundation, the Multi-Family Therapy Group with Drumming model was developed. The program provides eight weeks of therapy for four or five youth offenders and their caregivers for the purpose of decreasing at-risk behaviors in the community. Each one-hour weekly group consists of approximately thirty minutes of hand-drumming and thirty minutes of talk therapy. The drumming is used to build ties in a nontaboo way between group members and between
youth and their families. It also helps to address cultural and trust barriers. The verbal component of the group provides a space for participants to examine issues that led to the offending behaviors. The group members explore alternative ways to cope with such issues and stressors. Of the fifteen families, thirteen have completed the program. Of the thirteen families to complete the program, nine of them sought to continue the program beyond the scheduled eight weeks. The model has also been used with older teens, without caregiver participation, through Colorado Probation’s Treatment Accountability for Safer Communities program.

Creating a multicultural arts and healing community

Over the past year, a leadership team has been formed from the core group of families of the Whittier Drum Project and the community. We have worked with consultants, provided by technical assistance grants from the Denver Foundation, to develop our skill sets and create a new organization that incorporates the project but has a broader mission: to use multicultural arts and therapeutic services to build strong and healthy individuals, families, and neighborhoods in northeast Denver. In addition to the Whittier Drum Project program, we now offer drumming through other multicultural arts programs and clinical services such as the Banyan Tree Center (which I formed in 2004) and multi-family therapy groups. The Banyan Tree, which recently gained nonprofit status as a project of the Colorado Nonprofit Development Center, is a community-driven multicultural arts and healing center in Denver that integrates culturally diverse visual, performing arts, and therapeutic services to individuals, families, and neighborhoods.

It has been quite a ride from that first residential treatment center hand-drumming group to the Banyan Tree. Inherent in this work is the adage, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Hand-drumming has proven to be an incredible means for putting this adage into action. The need for a safe place for youth to connect through cultural activ-
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Ities, socialization, and healing is apparent, as we are witness to neighborhood violence, drug use and trafficking, and increased homelessness. Going back to Winnicott’s clinical, developmental perspective on culture, drumming creates safe transitional space, and drums become transitional objects that connect youth to youth, youth to adults, youth to ancestors, and youth to community. In the Whittier neighborhood, hand-drumming is creating community, facilitating healing, and, as one participant put it, building a collective self-esteem.

Note

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